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A BRUSH WITH THE BANNOCKS.

BY GENERAL NELSON A. MILES, U. S. A.

IN THE summer of 1878 I organized an expedition to move into and explore a wagon route and telegraph line west of Fort Keogh, to reconnoitre the country, and also to visit Yellowstone Park. I selected a command from among the most experienced veterans of the Indian Territory and the Northwest; and then with a strong wagon train, a well-equipped pack train, and all the appliances, camp equipage, and field equipment necessary, we leisurely moved up the Yellowstone. The party consisted of ten officers, four civilians, five ladies, and three children.

We moved up the Yellowstone to the mouth of the Rosebud; thence up that beautiful valley to its head, practically going over the route followed by Custer's command; thence over the high divide to the Little Big Horn, camping near the battle ground where the massacre occurred, and making a second examination of the ground, the topography of the country, and the distance between the different forces. In this second examination we were accompanied by some of the prominent actors in that tragedy on the side of the hostile Indians.

Moving up the Yellowstone was a continuous delight; the country was covered with rich verdure and the trees were in full foliage; game was abundant, and the waters of the upper Yellowstone were filled with delicious trout. The officers rode on horseback, and the ladies and children, occasionally in wagons, were more frequently in the saddle.

After ten or twelve days' march, as we neared the Yellowstone Park, I received information that the Bannocks had gone on the war path in Idaho, were committing depredations, and were coming through Yellowstone Park, threatening to invade our own

territory. Of course, this meant serious business and I at once prepared to check any such invasion on their part.

Sending the non-combatants to the nearest military post, Fort Ellis, just a short distance from where Boseman now stands and immediately adjoining the National Park, I started with seventy-five men to make a forced march and occupy the passes of the mountains through which it was natural to suppose the Bannocks would attempt to go, on their way east. It had been their habit to go through the mountains during the summer season to trade with the Crow Indians or hunt buffalo. There were two passes through which they could travel, one of which was known as the Boulder Pass, a very rough and difficult trail, and the other was Clarke's Fork Pass, which was a distance of approximately one hundred and fifteen miles from our starting point. In order to meet all chances, it became necessary for me to divide my small force. Believing that they would be less likely to go out through the Boulder than through Clarke's Fork Pass, I sent Lieutenant Bailey with forty men to occupy the former position, while with the balance of the men I proceeded to the other.

I had already sent forward scouts to the Crow agency, urging the Crow Indians to join us in the expedition against the Bannocks. The Crows had always been loyal to the government and friendly to the whites, but as at the same time they had also been friendly with the Bannock Indians, they hesitated about going against them. The importance of arresting any hostile body of Indians liable to commit depredations on other reservations and neighboring settlements was explained to them. They were also offered rations and ammunition and all the stock that they could capture from the Bannocks. In consideration of these inducements, they agreed with the scout that I had sent forward to go on the arrival of the command. When we did arrive, seeing the small body of thirty-five men march past, they inquired how soon the command would get there. They were assured that although this was the only command we had, it was composed entirely of experienced Indian fighters, that every man in it was a medicine man, and that we needed no greater force to go against the Bannocks. But in spite of all we could say, they decided that they would not go with such a squad as that, so we told them to remain where they were.

The command moved on, and in the course of an hour two strong, hardy, brave-looking Crow warriors rode up and joined us, saying that they were not afraid of anything and were going with the command. Their example was followed by others, the bravest first and the most timid last, until we had been joined by seventy-five Crow warriors. It then appeared more like an Indian expedition than anything else.

As rapidly as possible we crossed the country, taking but little rest, and by forced marches reached the vicinity of Clarke's Fork Pass, discovering that up to that time there had been no sign of the Bannock Indians. The command was concealed in a "pocket" in the mountains, a name given by hunters and trappers to a very small park surrounded by high buttes and steep cliffs. The soldiers, Indians, horses, pack mules, all were kept concealed, and a few scouts sent out to occupy the crests of the high buttes and, using their field glasses or telescopes under the cover of some cedar or pine bush, to discover the first sign of the approach of the hostile Indians. Occasionally an officer would be detailed to crawl up the heights and examine the country—especially Clarke's Fork Pass—with his glass; but he was instructed never to reveal as much as the top of his head over the crest unless it was covered by some bush or tall grass.

On the following morning about eleven o'clock the hostile Bannocks were seen to appear on the top of a mountain, and slowly wind their way down the circuitous rocky trail, a distance of three or four miles, moving along down Clarke's Fork, and going into camp in the valley within six miles of the command. They unsaddled and turned out their horses (quite a large herd), posted their videttes or lookouts on the bluffs immediately adjacent to the camp, built their camp fires, and settled down, apparently confident of their safety, and utterly unconscious of the enemy concealed in their vicinity.

To approach their camp it was necessary to pass over a level plain of two or three miles in extent, and the lookouts or videttes would have discovered the command the moment it debouched from its place of concealment. Having once discovered it, it would be but the work of a moment for the Indians to jump on their ponies and escape over the foot hills and rugged passes of that mountainous region. We therefore decided to remain in our place of concealment, from which we watched the

camp all that day, and then at night moved slowly down to within two miles of it.

At nine o'clock that night I called the two Indians who had first followed us from the Crow agency, and told them that I wanted them to discover the condition of the Bannock camp. An Indian wrapped in his blanket could crawl up under cover of the darkness and walk near a hostile Indian camp without being detected, whereas a white man would be immediately recognized. This was especially so as the night was dark and rainy, and the Bannocks were curled up sheltering themselves from the rain and cold, and if the Crow scouts had been seen, wrapped as they were in their blankets, they would have very likely been mistaken for some men belonging to the Bannock camp, walking about looking out for their horses.

The Crow scouts returned between twelve and one o'clock, and reported that the Bannock camp was in a very strong position, difficult to approach, with the sage brush as high as a horse's back about it, and that if we attempted to take it we would be whipped. The rain had then been pouring down in torrents for several hours, and the conditions were anything but cheerful.

For this dangerous, hazardous, and valuable service, these two men were afterward well rewarded, but they were told at the time that the attack would be made at daybreak, and the Crows were expected to assist—at least they were expected to capture the herd of horses, and they were then directed to guide us to the hostile camp. Slowly and noiselessly, the command moved in the direction in which the camp was supposed to be, stopping to listen in the dark, and occasionally making long waits for some ray of light or other sign to direct them. When we had moved to a distance that we believed would place us very near the camp, we halted and waited until about four o'clock or after, as we were not sure of its exact location or direction. Fortunately a dim light suddenly appeared on our left, about five hundred yards distant, indicating the exact locality of the camp, and that we had almost passed it.

The troops were formed in skirmish line, and the center directed to guide on this light, which was evidently caused by some one just starting a fire for the morning, and as good a line as could be arranged in the dark was made. The Crows were told

to take position on the right of the line. The troops moved slowly and cautiously in the direction of the light, passing through the grazing herd of horses and ponies. A halt was occasionally made in order to wait until the troops could see a short distance, and it was noticed that, as we passed through the herd, the Crow warriors gradually commenced to quietly move off some of the Bannock horses, and instead of remaining on the right of the troops where they had been placed, they gradually worked to the left, and as they did so drove the herd to the rear. As day broke the troops were enabled to see, and they moved forward until they got within a hundred yards of the camp before opening fire.

The Indians were taken completely by surprise ; some of them jumped into the river and swam to the other side, about fourteen of the warriors were killed and the balance of the camp surrendered. The fight lasted but a short time and was over by six o'clock in the morning.

Before the affair was over there was scarcely a Crow Indian and not a single Bannock horse to be seen in the valley. While the Crows had been useful on account of their formidable numbers, the principal object of their attention was the herd of captured horses. While some of them did not stop until they had reached the agency, a distance of seventy-five miles, where they arrived about one o'clock in the afternoon, others left their captive stock in the hands of their friends four or five miles back in the foot hills and returned to the assistance of the troops. They did good service especially in calling out to the enemy to surrender and capturing scattered Bannocks ; also in capturing a small party that came into the valley later and were evidently following the main band with a lot of stolen horses, one day behind.

I had sent the interpreter on ahead from the Crow Agency, as we marched out to go up to Clarke's Fork, to see what he could find out about the enemy. He could speak both Crow and Bannock. When he had gone over the pass and into the park he met the Bannocks on the other side of Clarke's Fork Pass. They asked him if there were any troops in the neighborhood. He replied "No," and then they said they wanted to go over and trade with the Crows. After leaving them he passed on as if journeying in the same direction from whence they had come, until he had got a safe distance away, and then circled around

and reported to me the night before the attack. He was a good man and was killed in that fight.

The affair was a very disastrous one to the Indians, eleven of their number being killed and a great many wounded, while the entire camp was captured with 250 animals.

Our loss was small in numbers, but among the killed was Captain Andrew S. Bennett, of the Fifth Infantry, a most accomplished, meritorious, and valuable officer. It was a sad sight as his friends gazed upon his dead body, which Surgeon Redd had placed against a tree, with the shoulders bare, in order to examine the wound. The bullet hole was in the centre of his breast, and had evidently caused instant death. His features were as white and perfect as if chiselled from marble, and he looked like an ideal hero. It seemed hard that this true patriot, who had risked his life on many a hard-fought battlefield, both during the war and on the frontier, must meet his death far away in that wild and rugged region, amid the eternal snows of the mountains. His body was tenderly cared for and sent East to his relatives in Wisconsin.

The command remained beside the rapid, clear trout stream that came down from the mountains, during that day, and in the evening witnessed the burial of one of the Crow warriors who had been killed in the fight and had been a very popular man in the tribe. After his body had been arranged for its final resting place, and bedecked with all the valuables that he had possessed, as well as some belonging to his friends, and his grave had been prepared on the butte near the camp, his body was lifted on the shoulders of four of his comrades, who slowly moved up the side of the butte chanting their sorrow in low, mournful tones, while the other Indians bewailed his loss according to the custom of their people.

NELSON A. MILES.